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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 001617

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [SA](#) [LE](#) [BA](#)  
SUBJECT: SAUDI CROWN PRINCE TRIUMPHANTLY RETURNS; TO WHAT  
REMAINS UNCLEAR

REF: RIYADH 1434

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Classified By: Ambassador James B. Smith,  
reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) A wan but happy and allegedly "fully recovered" Crown Prince Sultan returned to Riyadh on December 11 after over a year's absence for treatment of colon cancer in the US and Morocco. Led by a beaming King Abdullah, the royal family turned out in full force to mount a hero's welcome, amplified by unprecedented celebratory media coverage and displays of thousands of welcome flags and panegyric posters, banners and billboards throughout the city. On his first day back, live television cameras tracked an apparently alert and engaged Crown Prince as he visited hospitalized wounded Saudi soldiers, received visiting dignitaries (including the Lebanese Prime Minister and Bahrain's King) and ended his day at a lavish welcome home rally hosted by Interior Minister Nayif at a Riyadh stadium. Many Embassy contacts suspect the Prince has come home to die. However, his relative vigor would suggest that this is not imminent. Nevertheless, the chattering classes are in overdrive with rumors and speculation about impending resignations and royal personnel changes, mostly fabricated. The bottom line, however, is that the Saudi royal family has prepared for the inevitable passing of both the King and Crown Prince with promulgation of the Allegiance Commission law (reftel), and will likely manage a smooth transition of power when the time comes. End summary.

A HERO'S WELCOME HOME

2. (U) On December 11, after over a year abroad for treatment of colon cancer, Saudi Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz finally returned home, "fully recovered" to resume his royal duties, according to a Royal Diwan statement. He was accompanied by his full-brother, Riyadh Governor Prince Salman, who had stayed at his side throughout his long illness. Despite public statements by his eldest son, Khalid bin Sultan, and other royals over the last several weeks, that the Crown Prince was in "good health" and ready to go back to work, many were skeptical that he would actually come home since his return had been postponed repeatedly in recent months. In the week prior to his arrival, the city of Riyadh was festooned with welcome-home flags, and panegyric

banners, posters and billboards. On the day itself, ceremonial honor guards, troops and ambulances lined the road from Riyadh to King Khalid International Airport's Royal Terminal, where the King, much of the royal family, and most senior government officials turned out to greet and embrace the Crown Prince with great fanfare.

CROWN PRINCE EXULTS, PRAISES KING,  
LAMENTES FLOODS, AND URGES CHARITY  
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13. (U) In remarks during the arrival ceremony, Crown Prince Sultan expressed joy to be back on Saudi soil. Speaking in a sometimes halting rasp, the Crown Prince focused first on the King, thanking him and others for their care and attention, and praising the King's policies. Describing Abdullah as "one of the most influential leaders in the world," Sultan lauded his skill in leading the Kingdom through the economic crisis, in uniting Arabs, and --interestingly-- in "reforming the executive agencies in the country." The country was progressing "as planned by the King," Sultan declared, and the King was wise to confront the infiltrators who tried to cross the Kingdom's southern borders, "but were prevented from achieving their terrorist goals." Sultan also expressed sorrow over the suffering and losses caused by the Jeddah floods, called on Palestinians to overcome their differences, and emphasized the need for stability in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan. Finally, in remarks not reproduced in official SPA transcripts but caught by the live cameras, Sultan thanked those who had come to greet him but wished that "all the money devoted to his reception could be spent on the needy."

OPEN PRISONS AND STADIUMS TO CELEBRATE

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14. (C) In a grand gesture to mark the Crown Prince's safe return, King Abdullah ordered an amnesty for prisoners convicted of petty crimes or violations, "who did not pose a danger to the state." In a similar gesture (perhaps bordering on lese majeste), nephew Prince Sultan bin Fahd, President of Youth Welfare and Sports, issued a "pardon" for "all suspended players in all sports." (Comment: There were many such players, given the sports minister's proclivity for intemperate outbursts over his players' offenses, real or imagined. End comment.) Not to be outdone, or be accused of lese majeste of his own for having accepted the position of Second Deputy Prime Minister in his brother's absence, Minister of Interior Prince Nayif invited "the citizenry" to a celebratory rally and dinner on Sunday evening (December 13) at a Riyadh sports stadium, the 30,000-seat Prince Fahd Olympic Complex. The lavish event, though reminiscent of a political rally, was essentially a royal family reunion -- these days only a stadium suffices to hold the ever-expanding Al Saud clan. Notably absent, however, was King Abdullah (who might have been preparing for attendance at the GCC summit in Kuwait on Tuesday December 15). Notable non Al-Saud attendees included Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, and Bahraini King Hamad bin Issa Al-Khalifa. The event was broadcast live on Saudi TV, and disrupted traffic throughout the city.

DANCING WITH SUCCESSORS  
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15. (U) Live television cameras tracked Prince Sultan throughout his first day back on the job, as he visited Saudi soldiers wounded on the Yemen border at a Riyadh hospital, received visiting dignitaries (including the Lebanese Prime Minister and Bahrain's King) and ended his day at Prince Nayif's stadium-sized welcome home bash. Sultan appeared alert and engaged throughout his meetings, and made his way into the stadium rally unassisted, to roars of approval from the packed bleachers. Clearly enjoying the adulation, Sultan

responded by raising clasped fists in a victory salute. He even managed to join his half-brothers and nephews in a traditional celebratory "Ardha" sword dance, though he was not seen actually lifting a sword. The dance itself presented a colorful spectacle, with many of the remaining sons and grandsons of King Abdulaziz linking arms to present a literal "line of succession" of contenders for the Saudi throne swaying in unison to the beat of traditional drums and chants.

CHEERS FROM THE CITIZENRY?  
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16. (C) As far as can be gauged, public reaction to Sultan's return has been positive, though some skepticism about the Prince's actual state of health has been voiced in the Saudi blogosphere. Long-time Saudi observers often repeat the claim that the Crown Prince is "genuinely popular with Saudi youth." While this is difficult to verify, Sultan has a reputation for generosity and charity, and the many expressions of welcome circulating via SMS, email, and in internet commentary seemed genuine. However, we did hear disappointment expressed that thus far the only government gesture had been a general amnesty -- one longtime LES recalled that during similar celebrations when King Khalid returned from successful heart surgery abroad in 1979, he ordered a general pay raise for all government employees. No such bounty this time around. However, the "good news" of Sultan's return has certainly provided the government with a welcome distraction from distressing images of the Jeddah flood devastation and growing casualties in the Yemeni border conflict.

COMMENT: AL SAUD PREPARED FOR THE INEVITABLE  
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17. (C) Given Crown Prince Sultan's lengthy absence, questions about the extent of his "recovery" are inevitable. Many Embassy contacts suspect that his treatment failed and he has returned to die at home. We would note that if this were the case, then Sultan's relative vigor during his first day back on the job would suggest this fate is not imminent. As might also be expected, the chattering classes have gone

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into overdrive with rumors and speculation regarding possible royal personnel changes -- a common refrain is the claim that the Crown Prince is planning to retire after having his patriotic contributions to the Kingdom's development duly celebrated. As far as Embassy can determine, such suppositions are fabrications, but given the Crown Prince's age and the seriousness of his illness, it is not unreasonable to question whether he will be able to fully resume his official duties. This uncertainty, however, does not translate into uncertainty over what would happen next were he to relinquish his duties. Embassy is inclined to believe this possibility is unlikely given the Al Saud's dislike of breaking with tradition -- no Crown Prince has yet "resigned." Beyond this, as noted in reftel, the promulgation of the Allegiance Commission Law suggests the senior Al Saud have prepared for a smooth succession, though they are not likely to make decisions until circumstances -- the death of the King or Crown Prince -- dictate that a choice must be made. For the moment, senior Saudi royals from the King on down have used the occasion of Prince Sultan's return to emphasize their unity and supplant stories of government mismanagement with rejoicing that underscores the Al Saud's strong survival skills.  
SMITH